

Eighty years since the first Moscow Trial

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1 September 2016

Eighty years have passed since the first Moscow Show Trial, one of the most sordid frame-ups in world history. Also known as the Trial of the Sixteen, the “Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center” took place in Moscow from August 19 to August 24, 1936. All sixteen defendants were sentenced to be shot and their personal property confiscated.

Beyond those at the trial, Lev Davidovich Trotsky and his son, Lev Lvovich Sedov, were declared in absentia to be “subject to immediate arrest and trial by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR,” i.e., if captured, they too would be tried and executed in mockery of the most elementary judicial standards.

Of the sixteen defendants, eleven were prominent Old Bolsheviks who had joined the party prior to 1917, organized and led the October Revolution, founded the Communist International in 1919, fought heroically in the Civil War (1918-1921), and established the Soviet Union as the world’s first workers’ state. Five other defendants were agents of the Soviet secret police, forming a grotesque amalgam with the genuine revolutionaries sitting beside them on the defendants’ bench.

Let us take a brief look at the biographies of some of the victims. **Grigory Zinoviev**, age 53, had been a Bolshevik since 1903 and one of Lenin’s closest collaborators. He participated in the antiwar Zimmerwald and Kienthal conferences. He was a member of the Central Committee, 1907-1927; chairman of the Petrograd Soviet after October 1917; chairman of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, 1919-1926. He participated in the Joint Opposition in 1926-1927; capitulated to Stalin in 1927. After the assassination of Sergei Kirov on December 1, 1934, Zinoviev was arrested, tried and convicted on January 16, 1935 of “moral responsibility” for the murder. He was sentenced to ten years in prison, where he remained until the 1936 show trial.

Lev Kamenev, age 53, joined the Social Democratic Party in 1901; he was a Bolshevik from 1903. He worked closely with Lenin. A member of the Central Committee from April 1917 to 1927. Chairman of the Moscow Soviet, 1918-1926. Member of the Joint Opposition in 1926-1927, capitulating in December 1927. Tried in January 1935 for Kirov’s murder and sentenced to five years in prison. Tried again in July 1935 and sentenced to ten years.

Ivan Nikitich Smirnov, age 55, in the party since 1899; repeatedly arrested, imprisoned and exiled under the tsar. Led the Red Army in crushing Kolchak’s forces in Siberia during the Civil War. A member of the Central Committee; in the Left Opposition from 1923 to 1929. Arrested and imprisoned in 1933.

Sergei Mrachkovsky, age 53, a Urals worker; a Bolshevik from

1905; hero of the Civil War, in the Left Opposition from 1923 to 1929. Exiled in 1933.

Vagarshak Ter-Vaganian, age 43, a Bolshevik from 1912. Founding editor of the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism* in 1922; first major work on Plekhanov (1924); in the Left Opposition from 1923 to 1929.

Grigory Yevdokimov (52), **Ivan Bakaev** (49), **Efim Dreitser** (42), **Rikhard Pikel** (40), **Isaak Reingold** (39) and **Eduard Goltsman** (54) also had distinguished, if less prominent, party careers.

The charges at the trial were fantastic: aside from killing Kirov, the defendants supposedly attempted (but failed) to assassinate Stalin, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Zhdanov, Ordzhonikidze and several other Soviet leaders. They allegedly worked with the Nazi Gestapo in developing these murderous plans. Other charges of espionage and sabotage were also levied.

What was the evidence? Nothing except the confessions of the accused. To those who approached the trial with the slightest degree of critical judgment, the confessions alone would have raised severe doubts about the legitimacy of the proceedings. But many journalists and political figures (*New York Times* reporter Walter Duranty; US Ambassador Joseph Davies; British jurist D. N. Pritt, who called the proceedings “an example for the whole world”) vouched for the validity of the frame-up. There were, however, dissenting voices: Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, others who subsequently served on the Dewey Commission, which heard exhaustive testimony in Mexico in 1937 and, finding Trotsky innocent of all charges, declared the show trial a frame-up.

In later years, the means of obtaining the confessions emerged through the testimony of various participants in preparing the trial. Zinoviev and Kamenev resisted confessing for weeks. Finally, they requested an audience with the Politburo. Stalin and Voroshilov met them as a “commission” of the Politburo and promised that if Zinoviev and Kamenev cooperated, their lives would be spared, their families would not be touched, and no former oppositionists would be executed. Zinoviev and Kamenev agreed, but were nevertheless executed on August 25, 1936.

With other defendants, torture was used. Mrachkovsky, for instance, was interrogated for 90 straight hours several times over several weeks. Lev Sedov noted that several figures who had cases opened against them did not appear at the trial; it is likely that several died under torture or were shot due to their intransigence.

Although the trial produced the convictions that Stalin desired, there were embarrassing moments that exposed the fraudulent nature of the testimony. Goltsman, for instance, testified that he had traveled to Copenhagen in 1932 to meet with Trotsky and

Sedov at the Hotel Bristol. As it turned out, the hotel had been torn down in 1917 and rebuilt only in 1936. No such meeting ever took place.

Goltsman also testified that Trotsky's call in an open letter to "remove Stalin" could only mean to kill him, rather than remove him through political means. As a Marxist, Trotsky had been a life-long opponent of individual terrorism; individual acts, no matter how heroic they seemed, could not serve as a substitute for the revolutionary action of the working class led by a revolutionary party. Claiming that Trotsky had embraced individual terrorism in the 1930s was a sign, as Trotsky explained, of "totalitarian idiotism."

When the first Moscow Trial began, Trotsky was under virtual house arrest in Norway. Under pressure from the Soviet Union, the Norwegian Labor Party was attempting to muzzle Trotsky and prevent him from answering the slanders of the trial. A new voice soon emerged, however; Lev Sedov, Trotsky's son, published in the *Bulletin of the Opposition* what was to become *The Red Book on the Moscow Trial*. Sedov meticulously examined the details of the trial and exposed them as a fraudulent attack on genuine revolutionaries.

By April 1937, Trotsky had organized a counter-trial in the form of the Dewey Commission in Mexico, where Trotsky was now located after expulsion from Norway. The voluminous refutation of the first two Moscow show trials (a second occurred in January 1937) is presented in the book *Not Guilty*. The two concluding points state: (22) "We therefore find the Moscow trials to be frame-ups. (23) We therefore find Trotsky and Sedov not guilty."

In carrying out these trials, Joseph Stalin was launching an assault on the legacy and the actual leaders of the first successful socialist revolution. As the Bonapartist leader of an increasingly counterrevolutionary social layer, the Soviet bureaucracy, it was not enough for Stalin to expel these Old Bolsheviks from the party and persecute them with exile or imprisonment.

Opposition to the Stalin regime had been steadily growing throughout the 1930s in the wake of the reckless and unplanned collectivization of agriculture, break-neck industrialization, Hitler's coming to power in Germany in 1933, and increased social differentiation manifested in the unjustifiable privileges of the ruling Soviet and party bureaucracy. These were some of the disastrous consequences of Stalin's repudiation of socialist internationalism and adoption of the nationalist and anti-Marxist program of "socialism in one country."

By 1936, revolutionary conditions were emerging in France and Spain (the Spanish Civil War broke out on June 18) that could reawaken the long suppressed aspirations of the working class in the Soviet Union. The first Moscow Trial and the ensuing Great Terror were a preemptive strike against not just the Old Bolsheviks in general, but particularly against anyone associated with the Left Opposition that had been led by Leon Trotsky.

Stalin had organizationally defeated the Left Opposition by the Fifteenth Party Congress in December 1927. Some oppositionists capitulated soon after the congress, but thousands were expelled from the party and exiled to remote regions of the Soviet Union. Trotsky was exiled to distant Alma Ata in 1928, and then expelled from the Soviet Union in 1929. Stalin believed that, without an

apparatus and with few material resources, Trotsky's influence would rapidly fade. He could not have made a more profound error.

With the catastrophic defeat of the German working class marked by Hitler's coming to power in 1933—the result of the opportunist and nationalist policies dictated by the Soviet bureaucracy and carried out by the leadership of the German Communist Party—Trotsky declared that the Third International under Stalin's leadership was dead as a revolutionary organization. He issued the call to build a new, Fourth International, which was founded in September 1938.

In the five years leading up to 1938, Trotsky acknowledged that the work he was doing in preparing a new international was the most important of his entire life. In article after article, he exposed the bankruptcy of the Stalinist regime in order to educate advanced layers of the working class.

In 1936, just days before the first Moscow Trial, he finished his monumental book, *Revolution Betrayed*, which remains the most important Marxist analysis of the contradictions of Soviet society. In it, he explained that the working class would have to overthrow the Soviet bureaucracy in a political revolution and restore the program of world socialist revolution if the Soviet Union was to advance towards socialism. If the bureaucracy remained in power, the eventual result would be the restoration of capitalism, throwing the working class back decades. Above all, these battles would be fought out on the world arena in mass struggles of the international working class. Anticipating the revolutionary upheavals that would follow the impending world war, Trotsky was confident that Stalinism would be overcome.

The Moscow Trials, and the blood purges that followed, had a devastating impact, virtually annihilating the socialist elements in the working class and intelligentsia. The trials paved the way for the betrayals and defeats that followed—the suppression of the French general strike, the defeat of the Spanish Revolution, the Stalin-Hitler pact, the suppression of the postwar revolutionary upsurge—all of which culminated in Stalinism's final betrayal, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism.

Today, all the unresolved political and social issues that led to the October revolution of 1917 are reemerging on a world scale. Understanding that Stalinism is not the continuation of October, but a counterrevolutionary reaction against it, is crucial to preparing for the revolutionary battles that lie ahead.

To learn more about the Moscow Trials, this author recommends the following works: Leon Sedov, *The Red Book on the Moscow Trial* (1936/1980); Max Shachtman, *Behind the Moscow Trial* (1936/1971); Vadim Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror* (1996/1998); Vadim Rogovin, *Stalin's Terror of 1937-1938: Political Genocide in the USSR* (1997/2009) and David North, *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* (2014).



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